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S E C R E T BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000167

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/28/2031

TAGS: PREL BX IR

SUBJECT: DISCOURAGING VISIT TO IRAN BY SULTAN OF BRUNEI

REF: A. (A) BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 149 (NOTAL)

¶B. (B) STATE 45316 (NOTAL)

¶C. (C) STATE 47920

Classified By: Ambassador Emil Skodon, Reasons 1.4 (b, d, and h)

¶11. (S) Summary: As a result of our demarches about the inadvisability of the Sultan accepting an Iranian government invitation to visit Iran, it now appears less likely that any such invitation will be accepted. The British will reinforce our position in their own contacts with the Government of Brunei (GOB). While the GOB does not want to lend support to Teheran in its dispute with the international community over Iran's nuclear program, neither is it eager to join in pushing a fellow OIC member to comply with what it still perceives to be largely "western" demands. The Sultan may seek Arab views on the issue during a visit to Qatar and the UAE tentatively scheduled for April. End Summary.

¶12. (S) Ambassador delivered ref B demarche on March 27 to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) Director for Americas, Europe, and Africa Pengiran Alihashim. Ambassador stressed USG belief that Iranian nuclear issue could be resolved diplomatically, but only if Iran's leaders understood that the international community was united in its determination to prevent them from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. Acceptance of an invitation to visit Iran by the Sultan of Brunei would be perceived by the Iranians as a breach of that united front, and so feed their intransigence and lessen the likelihood of a diplomatic solution.

¶13. (S) In response, Alihashim spoke much more warily about Brunei's relations with Iran than he had in his last conversation with Ambassador on this topic (ref A), and walked back some of his previous statements. He said that it was no longer Iranian Foreign Minister Motaki who was hoping to visit Brunei in May, but rather his Deputy Foreign Minister. While Alihashim cautioned that he could not speak for the palace, he said MFAT officials had discussed the issue internally and were "not eager" to recommend any royal visit to Iran in response to an invitation that the Deputy ForMin might convey. Alihashim hinted that the MFAT might even discourage Iran's Deputy ForMin from coming to Brunei. He explained that the proximate reason for his trip would be to hold a technical meeting of the Brunei-Iran joint working committee on bilateral relations, but it was possible that schedule conflicts would not allow the appropriate MFAT officials to attend such a meeting at the time the Iranians were suggesting.

¶14. (S) Turning to the broader issue of the dispute over Iran's covert nuclear weapons programs, Alihashim said the GOB was still sorting out the charges and counter-charges from all sides. The MFAT had been "shocked" that the Iranians had rejected the Russian enrichment offer -- why turn that down if their only goal was to develop a civilian nuclear energy program? On the other hand, he continued, the Arab states did not appear to be joining the public chorus of criticism of Iran, and the GOB had to wonder why the nations that potentially were most threatened by Iranian nuclear weapons were not speaking out. A planned trip by the Sultan of Brunei to Qatar and the UAE in April might be an opportunity to hear directly from other Islamic leaders their

views on the charge by western states that Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapons capability. Given the above, for now the GOB would confine itself to the position that the dispute should be settled peacefully through multilateral organizations.

¶ 15. (S) Ambassador advised Alihashim that the GOB should not view this issue as "Iran against the West." Rather, it should consider the broad range of countries that had supported Iran's referral to the UNSC and the global security threats that would accrue from any Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons. He also recommended the GOB objectively assess Iran's record of non-cooperation and reach its own conclusion about the credibility of Teheran's claims that it was only pursuing a civilian nuclear program. Alihashim took these points and asked about the implications of the U.S.-India nuclear agreement for the NPT and global nonproliferation efforts in general. Ambassador drew from ref C points in response, emphasizing the different behaviors of India and Iran, and promised to forward more detailed talking points on the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative to the MFAT.

¶ 16. (S) As instructed ref B, Ambassador also briefed UK High Commissioner Saville on the possibility that an Iranian Foreign Ministry official would visit Brunei soon and deliver an invitation for the Sultan to visit Teheran. Saville, who was about to leave for consultations in London, said his stay there might be extended if Foreign Minister II Lim Jock Seng managed to arrange appropriate meetings at the FCO while on his own visit to the UK. Saville said that if such meetings were scheduled he would recommend that the FCO use the occasion to discourage any royal trip to Teheran.

¶ 17. (S) Comment: The risk-averse MFAT is seeking to avoid having the GOB become involved in a conflict it does not fully understand and still views primarily as one between a fellow OIC member and "The West." By making clear that any visit to Iran by the Sultan of Brunei would be portrayed as tacit support for the Iranian position, we have at least made MFAT think twice about the advisability of accepting such an invitation and may have killed the idea altogether for the time being. While that helps ensure that the GOB will not inadvertently lend support to the Iranians, getting it to speak out against Iranian intransigence is a different proposition and will remain an uphill struggle. End Comment.

SKODON